

February 26, 2001

The Honorable Ulysses Currie
Chair
Public Safety, Transportation and Environment
Subcommittee
James Senate Office Building, Room 100
110 College Avenue
Annapolis, MD 21401 - 1991

The Honorable Peter Franchot
Chair
Transportation and Environment Subcommittee
Lowe House Office Building, Room 424
84 College Avenue
Annapolis, MD 21401 - 1991

Dear Senator Currie and Delegate Franchot:

We, the undersigned members of the Montgomery County Council, support the state moving forward expeditiously with the Variable Pricing Study to explore one more promising approach to combat congestion and improve mobility in Maryland. From what we understand from the experience in other places that have implemented variable pricing—particularly the high-occupancy/toll (HOT) lanes in Orange County and San Diego, California—such an approach can potentially benefit everyone:

- Drivers of single-occupant vehicles who pay the toll would benefit with a congestion-free ride.
- Drivers of single-occupant vehicles who do not pay the toll would benefit due to less congestion in the non-toll lanes in which they are now driving.
- If the surplus toll revenue were used to promote transit and ridesharing in the corridor—by increasing bus service, reducing fares, and/or adding capacity or reducing charges at park-and-ride facilities—then carpoolers and transit riders would benefit as well.

Critics have predicted that HOT lanes would be ‘Lexus Lanes,’ lanes that only the wealthy could afford to use. Actual experience has shown that while there is a statistical correlation between income and HOT lane use, it is not nearly as skewed as has been forecast. On State Route 91 in Orange County, for example, surveys have shown that 50% of the highest income drivers (those with an annual income of at least \$100,000) reported that they never or infrequently use the HOT lanes, while 25% of the lowest income drivers (income less than \$25,000) use them frequently. Furthermore, if the surplus toll revenue were used to improve and promote transit, the benefits would be transferred to more lower-income commuters.

In fact, actual experience has shown there are relatively few drivers of any income level who use HOT lanes daily. On I-15 in San Diego, only 10% of HOT lane users drive them daily. On State Route

91 in Orange County, half of those using its HOT lanes drive them only once per week or less. All drivers can afford intermittent use of HOT lanes.

Some have noted that the high-occupancy-vehicle (HOV) lanes were unpopular when they were implemented. But one reason for converting them to HOT lanes is to give single-occupant drivers the choice to use them. Even if they use them only intermittently, these lanes are no longer considered “off-limits” to the majority of drivers who cannot rideshare. In Orange County, after 18 months of operation of the SR 91 HOT Lanes, about 75% of the commuting public expressed approval of virtually all aspects of the lanes, and 63% of randomly selected businesses in the corridor reported that the lanes were “good for business.”

Certainly HOT lanes first need to be thoroughly evaluated and tested to assure that they can be operated safely, fairly and efficiently before any decision is made to proceed to a wide-scale application. We would suggest that the soon-to-open HOV lanes on US 50 could provide an appropriate initial pilot effort.

HOT lanes and the use of their revenue to support transit and ridesharing provides the potential for improvements in auto and transit mobility, congestion relief, and air quality, while incurring neither additional cost to the State’s budget nor any negative community or environmental impacts. We urge that MDOT’s Variable Pricing Study proceed to the pilot stage as expeditiously as possible.

Sincerely,

Blair Ewing
President Montgomery County Council

Nancy Dacek
Montgomery County Council District 2

Steve Silverman
Montgomery County Council At Large

Phil Andrews
Montgomery County Council District 3

Michael Subin
Montgomery County Council At Large

Marilyn Praisner
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Montgomery County Council At Large

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Montgomery County Council District 5

Cc: John Porcari, Secretary, Maryland Department of Transportation